citizens advice

Impact report 2020/21

We are Citizens Advice

We can all face problems that seem complicated or intimidating. At Citizens Advice, we believe no one should have to face these problems without good quality, independent advice.

The Citizens Advice service offers free, confidential advice online, over the phone and in person.

When we say we're for everyone, we mean it. People rely on us because we're independent and totally impartial.

No one else sees so many people with so many different kinds of problems, and that gives us a unique insight into the challenges people are facing today. With the right evidence, we can show big organisations—from companies right up to the government—how they can make things better for people.

That's why we're here: to give people the knowledge and the confidence they need to find their way forward—whoever they are, and whatever their problem.

> **"It was a breath of fresh air to hear a friendly voice rather than an automated one. Citizens Advice does wonders for people's lives."**
>
> **—Client**

Adapting to keep our service running

Our health, work, education and social lives have all been affected in ways we wouldn't have imagined as we entered 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic brought with it new problems, challenges and uncertainty.

Despite the upheaval, we were still there to help people find a way forward. Our staff and volunteers worked tirelessly to make sure everyone who needed advice was able to get it, whoever they were and whatever their problem.

Every year, our advisers help millions of people with the problems they face in person. When the pandemic struck, face-to-face was no longer an option—but we adapted and were still there to help millions find a way forward.

Before the pandemic, we were investing in remote services and our online self-help advice, working to make sure as many people as possible could access support when they needed it. This put us in a strong position to respond.

Almost overnight, we shifted our face-to-face services to continue helping people on the phone and via email and webchat. We answered almost 1 million calls on Adviceline, our shared service for generalist advice—up from 620,000 the year before. Our national services also moved to helping people remotely, with both our Consumer Service and Help to Claim answering around 90% of calls last year.

And our online advice became more important than ever as people sought to quickly find information about new problems. We saw huge spikes in the number of people seeking advice on our website. As lockdown rules and the support available to people in England and Wales changed, we kept our advice up-to-date—updating our online self-help advice on an almost daily basis.

We started developing online advice to respond to problems related to Covid-19 in early 2020. In late February, we published a page called 'Coronavirus—what it means for you' and in March we added advice when support measures like the furlough scheme were introduced and laws changed. We also researched the areas which were causing the greatest confusion, adding new advice topics or examples to make rules easier to understand.

In the busiest year ever for our online self-help advice, our Covid-19 advice pages were viewed more than 6 million times between April 2020 and March 2021. We also helped people find the advice they needed through over **40 million visits to our website and 60.5 million total views of our online self-help advice.**

Our impact in 2020/21

The Covid-19 pandemic redefined life as we knew it. We were there to help millions find a path through the uncertainty.

40 million
visits to our website—
6 million more than in 2019/20

1.48 million
people used our phone service—
480,000 more than in 2019/20

624,000
624,000 people received help by email or webchat—205,000 more than in 2019/20

549,000 people
contacted our consumer helpline—
66,000 more than in 2019/20

58,000 people
still helped face to face

52,000 witnesses
supported through the Witness Service

Despite the considerable challenges posed by the pandemic for how we delivered our services, we still gave people the knowledge and confidence to find a way forward.

8 out of 10 people
said their problem was resolved following our advice—80% of those said they wouldn't have been able to solve their problem without us

9 in 10 people
said we helped them find a way forward

96% of witnesses
were satisfied with the support provided by our Witness Service and 90% felt more confident

We save the government and public services millions of pounds every year.

£618 million
in fiscal savings

£4.3 billion
in public savings

£2.7 billion
in savings to individuals

In the spotlight: Help through Hardship helpline with the Trussell Trust

In April 2020 we launched our Help through Hardship helpline in partnership with the Trussell Trust. Our advice-first approach means trained advisers help clients to understand and maximise their income with a view to moving them out of crisis, as well as providing a quick and seamless referral to a food bank and other wrap-around support if needed.

From the start of the pilot, the helpline has:

answered **over 49,000 calls**

helped **feed 60,000 people**

secured **£8.5 million in estimated financial gains** for clients

given clients access to **more than £180,000** through our partnership with the Red Cross and their Hardship Fund

helped 2 in 5 callers access further support through Citizens Advice to address underlying issues

"I'm a carer for my 2 disabled children and I can't work. I've called the helpline around 4 times since May last year. Each time I was supported with a different area that helped maximise my income. My first call dealt with my benefits situation and helped me with a Universal Credit claim. I was then given a full debt assessment on the helpline and this was followed up by a session with my local Citizens Advice to help manage my debts."

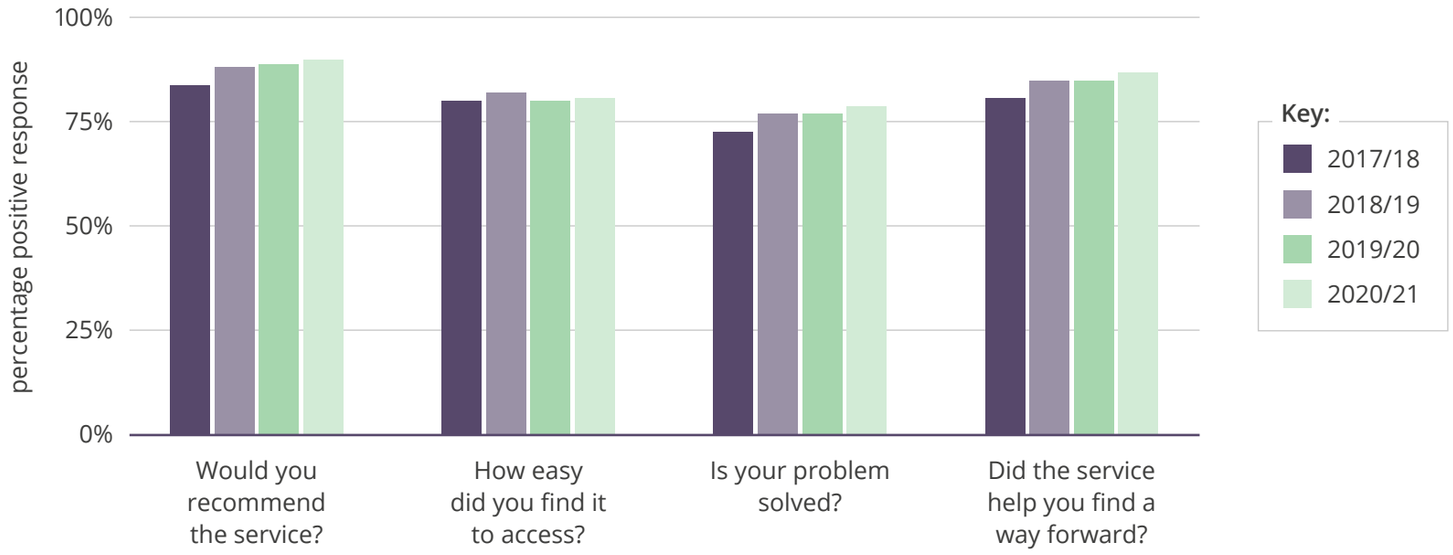
—Client, who was helped through our Help through Hardship helpline

We've improved our client experience

While we continue to help solve people's problems so they can find a way forward, we also want them to have a positive experience using our service.

Despite the considerable challenges for delivering advice posed by the pandemic, satisfaction with our service improved in comparison to recent years.

This year, over 60,000 clients told us what they thought about our service through our client experience survey.



8 out of 10 people said that their problem was solved after receiving our advice and 80% of those said that they wouldn't have been able to solve their problem without our help

90% of people said they would recommend the service, compared to 89% in 2019/20

89% of people using our Help to Claim service said that their problem was solved and 94% told us that our advice had helped them find a way forward

The wider impact of our advice

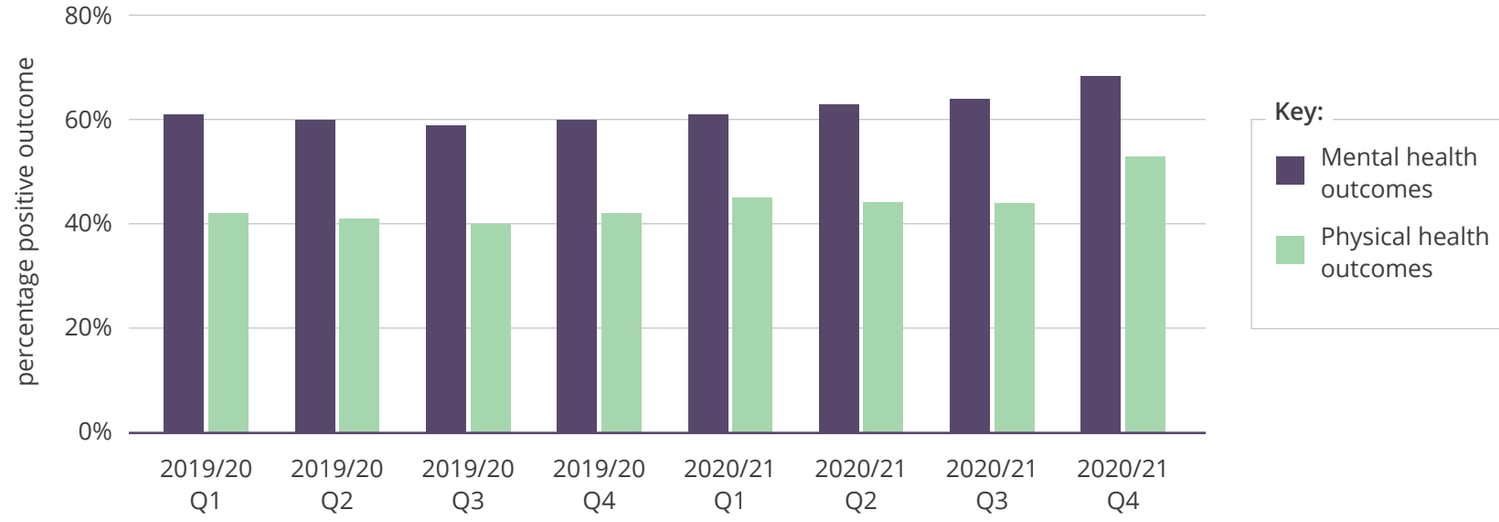
We know giving people advice and helping solve their problems can impact their wider lives in positive ways and make them more resilient and prepared for similar problems in the future.

In our client experience survey, we ask people whether they felt less stressed, depressed or anxious as a result of the help they received and whether they felt their physical health had improved.

The graph shows these outcomes have been gradually improving over the last 2 years.

The proportion of people who report improved mental and physical health after getting advice has increased over time

Mental health and physical health outcomes



This year, we also carried out robust client follow up research, National Outcomes and Impact Research (NOIR). This asked detailed questions about why people came to us for advice, what their problems were and how we helped.

All clients said their problems affected their lives in some way, including causing anxiety and financial difficulty.

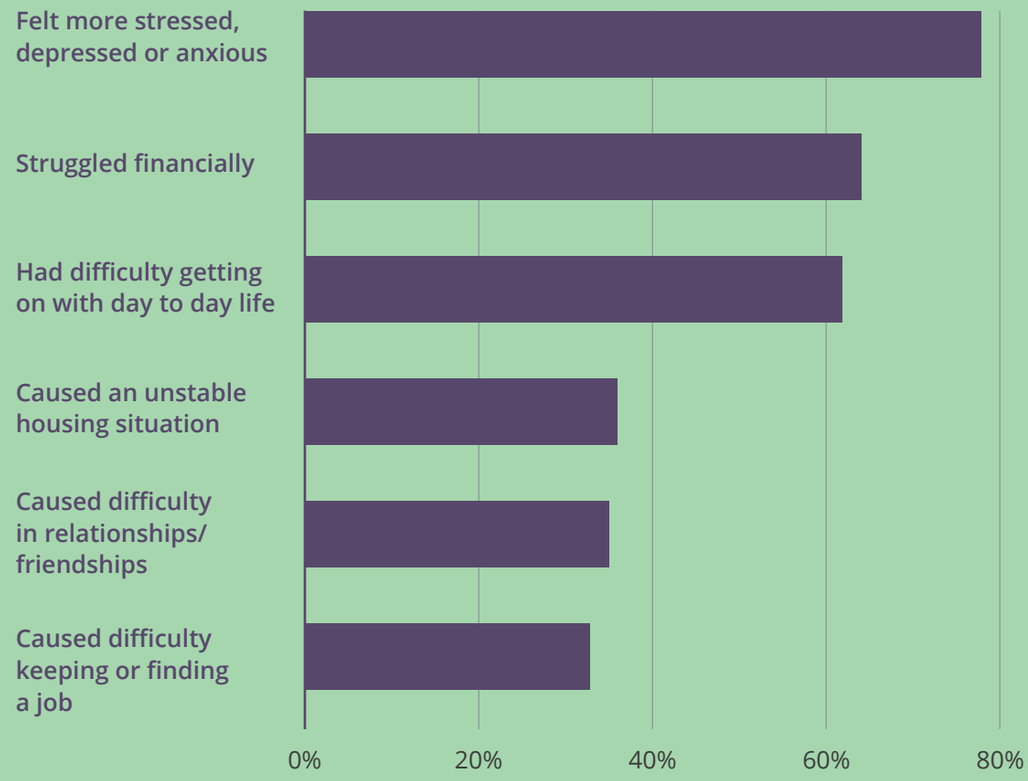
1 in 4 people

who received advice from us found their financial situation ‘quite’ or ‘very’ difficult, compared to 8% of the general population. Those who came to us for help with benefits and debt were more likely than others to be experiencing financial difficulty or ‘just getting by’

Around 1 in 2 people

who received advice from us were out of work at the time. Of those, 15% were recently furloughed or made redundant and 25% were unemployed due to long-term sickness or disability

Almost 80% of our clients said their problems made them feel stressed or anxious



Clients told us that we've helped them in a range of ways:

71% of people

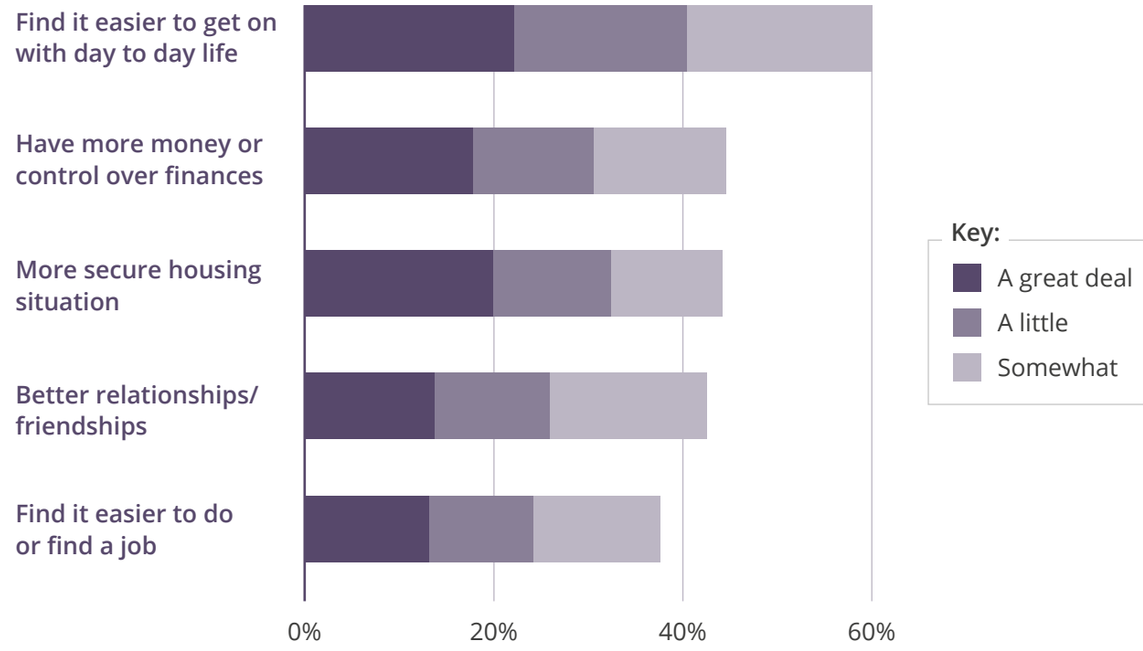
who said they weren't confident about solving their problem before they came to Citizens Advice felt more confident to take action to resolve a similar problem in the future

Over half of clients

said we helped to improve at least one aspect of their lives and 60% of clients said it was easier to get on with their day to day life after coming to us for help

Our advice improves various aspects of people's lives

Ways we help people



Different groups face different challenges

We know experience and outcomes may not be the same for all groups of clients. As NOIR research was conducted over the telephone with a nationally representative sample of clients, it included feedback from people who aren't digitally confident. These clients would not generally be able to complete our online client experience survey and therefore NOIR gave us an opportunity to understand more about the needs and experiences of this client group.

Around 1 in 5 people who received advice from us aren't confident using the internet, including to search for information or to fill in application forms online. This could present a barrier during the pandemic when advice provision is remote, and access to many services are online. Older clients and benefits clients are most likely to report low confidence with using the internet.

Clients with low confidence using the internet were less likely to have searched for information online before contacting us and less likely to have sought advice or information elsewhere. They were also less likely to feel confident to solve a similar problem again in the future following our advice and were slightly less likely to feel the service had been easy to access.

This suggests that people with less access to the internet or low confidence using it, may lack confidence generally in solving problems and subsequently require more intensive support. In addition, NOIR found that clients who are struggling financially are more likely to say that the service was difficult to access.

We've also been reporting on the gap in problems solved between particular client groups in the client experience survey since 2018:

- For the last 3 years, we've seen a reduction in the gap reported between problems solved for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic clients and White clients. The gap increased from 1.4% in 2019/20 to 3% in 2020/21. Our analysis suggests this may be partly explained by the shift to remote services— Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic clients have historically been more likely to access face-to-face services. We're committed to eliminating this gap.

- Older people have typically reported higher rates of problem resolution than younger people, but we're closing this gap. In 2020/21, the gap between clients over 65 and those under 25 was 3%—a reduction from 4.8% in 2019/20 and 7.8% in 2018/19. This may reflect the success of our employment advice this year, which included a high proportion of younger clients

Financial value

There's often a financial value to people having their problems solved. We follow up with a sample of our clients to record their financial outcomes. As a result of our service in 2020 to 2021:

£12,698
was the average client debt written off

£7,717
of entitled income gained for clients through their benefits

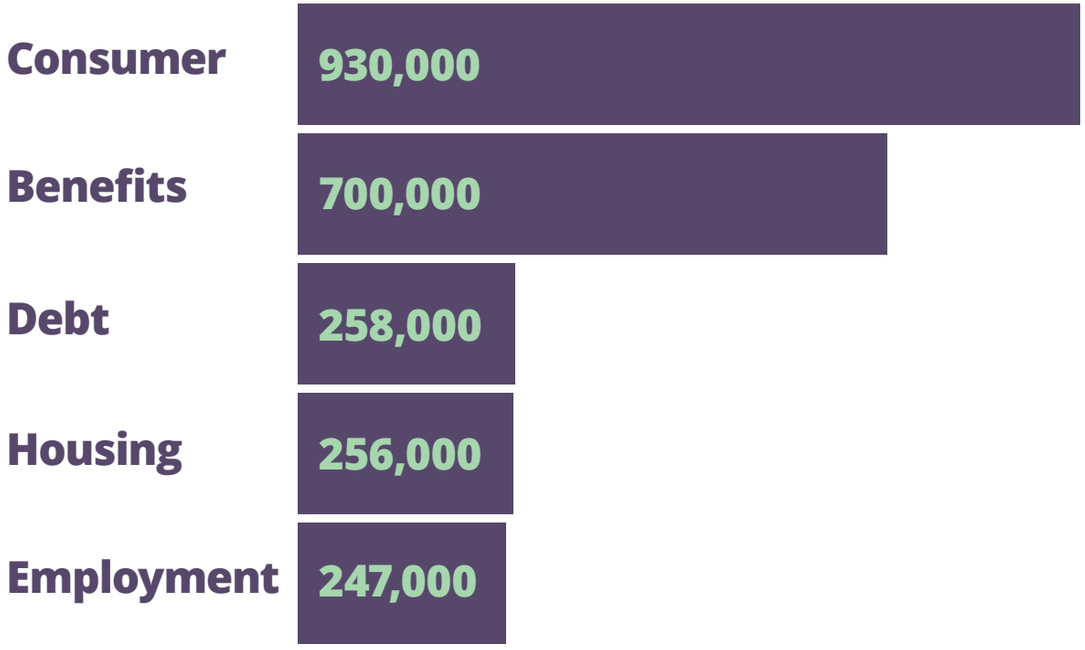
£1,221
of reported client savings as a result of using our consumer service

> "I was very worried before I spoke to Citizens Advice and was making myself ill with stress but after talking to them and receiving help I was much more relaxed."
>
> —Debt client

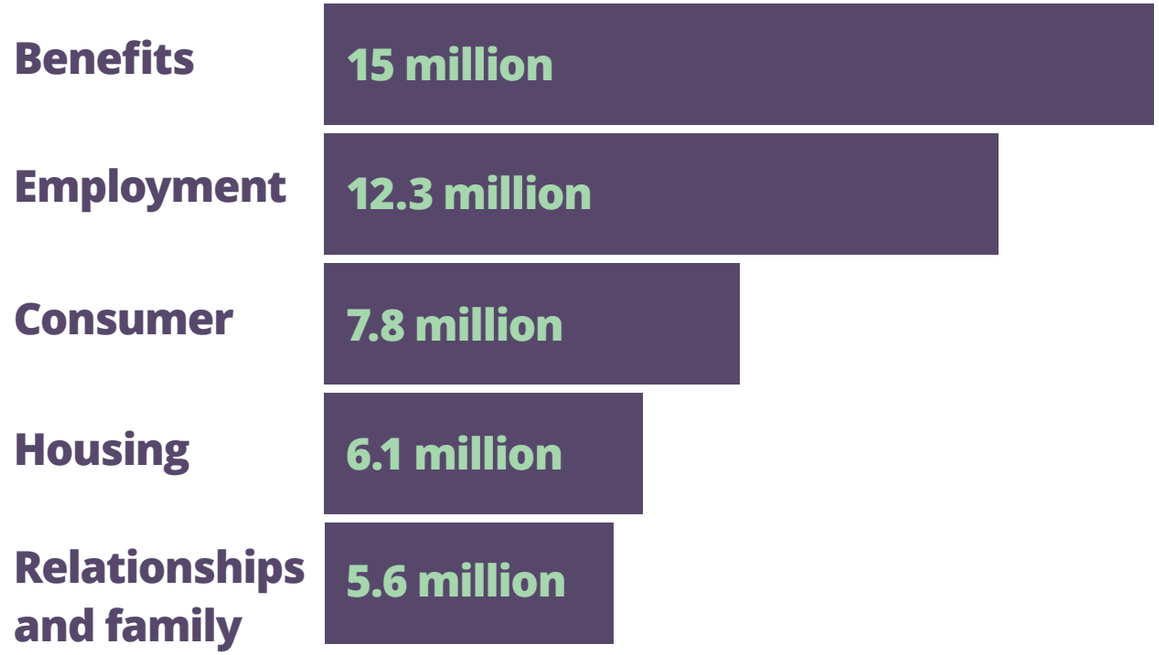
The problems people face

Every year, millions of people come to us with a range of different problems from benefits to housing, immigration to debt. This means our data—information on the problems people come to us for help with—provides us with a unique insight into the challenges people face across England and Wales.

In 2020/21, the top 5 issues we helped people with one-to-one were:



The top 5 areas of advice people came to our website for were:



Using our unique insight to tackle people's problems

The real-time nature of our data—tracking the problems people come to us for support with, either one-to-one or via our website—enables us to identify the societal problems people are facing.

In 2020, with so much uncertainty and societal challenges evolving rapidly, we were in a unique position to see the problems people faced as they emerged—even down to the minute.

Our online self-help advice revealed the patterns of change across the year.

Visits to our website spiked at the start of the first lockdown. This was driven by the need for advice such as whether to go to work or school, claiming benefits and using food banks.

As the first lockdown eased, visits to our website increased again with people needing advice about changes to social distancing rules, self-isolation, returning to the workplace and forming bubbles.

We also helped more people with housing issues. Following an initial spike in the early stages of the pandemic, we continued to help more people with housing—with views of our online self-help advice rising by 1.2 million from 2019/20.

The number of people coming to us for help with employment fell gradually across the year.

Benefits remained the top issue accessed online across the full year, but we provided less 1 to 1 advice than in the previous year. We saw a similar situation with debt advice, likely due to the protections put in place by the government during the pandemic. The £20 a week increase to Universal Credit, debt holidays and ban on bailiff enforcement eased the harshest impacts of the pandemic in these areas.

- Over half of people in our National Outcome and Impact research (NOIR) reported that their issue was brought about by or affected by the pandemic or resultant lockdown.

- In addition, around half also felt that the pandemic or lockdown had affected their ability to deal with the problem.

Read our 'Life through lockdown' report for more on what our data told us about the effects of the pandemic.

Achieving positive change for the people who come to us for help

In this challenging year, it was more important than ever to be a strong, clear voice speaking up for those who come to us for help. That's why, as well as using our insight to make decisions about our own service, we share it openly and use it to help shape government policy and inform real social change.

Keep the Lifeline

At the beginning of the pandemic, the government announced that Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits would increase by £20 per week for one year. Our advisers saw first-hand how important this extra money was to people who were hardest hit—whether this was people who lost their jobs or parents facing extra lockdown costs. This was also evidenced by a reduction in the number of people coming to us for 1 to 1 benefits and debt advice from the previous year.

Our research in 2020 told us that 75% of the people we helped with debt who were receiving these benefits would not be able to meet their living costs if the additional £20 was removed.

In response, we coordinated a campaign with our local Citizens Advice network to advocate for this vital lifeline to continue beyond March 2021.

Together we:

- **contacted 309 MPs** about the importance of the increase to their constituents
- **gained coverage about the campaign in more than 50 media outlets**, including locally-focused pieces in the Yorkshire Post, local BBC Radio and Eastern Daily Press as well as national coverage on Sky and BBC News Online
- **reached over 1 million people** through our social media campaign

Following months of campaigning alongside the wider #KeepTheLifeline coalition, the government announced a 6 month extension to the increase to Universal Credit and a one-off additional payment of £500 to help people on Working Tax Credit make ends meet.

Loyalty penalty

We're still seeing positive action from regulators following our super-complaint to the Competition and Markets Authority in 2018 about the loyalty penalty across 5 essential markets. The loyalty penalty is the extra cost people pay for services if they don't regularly switch providers. Last year we found that 8 in 10 people are paying this in at least one market.

For people in the lowest income band, paying the loyalty penalty across all 5 markets would cost them almost 8% of their annual household expenditure. This is particularly concerning in a year where 6 million people have fallen behind on bills because of the pandemic.

We were particularly pleased this year by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA)'s commitment to new rules which will ban 'price walking' in the insurance market. This means companies can't charge an existing customer more on renewing their insurance product than they would if they were new—effectively ending the loyalty penalty. The FCA expects this to save consumers £4.2 billion over 10 years.

We also called for further action to be taken, publishing a report looking at 2 markets where firms and regulators have not done enough to tackle the loyalty penalty. We found that, since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, 1 in 3 customers whose bundled mobile contract had come to an end had not switched, putting them at risk of paying the loyalty penalty. We also found that 42% of those whose fixed term mortgage had come to an end had not switched. We called on mobile providers and the FCA to take concrete and enforceable action to reduce customer bills now, to finish the job on the loyalty penalty.

In Wales

Our advocacy work helped protect families from the worst financial effects of the pandemic. We successfully advocated for an extension of the Discretionary Assistance Fund, a ban on evictions in the private rented sector and a series of income maximisation pilots, with an accompanying communications campaign, to help people claim all the benefits to which they're entitled.

Ahead of the Senedd elections, our #ValueOfAdvice campaign showcased the importance of independent advice and demonstrated the value we provide in terms of saving money for local and Welsh Government.

How we're helping people—our services across England and Wales

Whether those who come to us for help are dealing with one small problem or many complex ones, we're here to provide the support they need. Our range of services deliver tailored advice to people across England and Wales.

Scams Action

While our lives were turned upside down by the pandemic, scammers attempted to take advantage. In the first months of 2021, the number of scams reported to us more than doubled in comparison to the same period in 2020. Our research also showed that anyone could be targeted by scammers—and anyone could be tricked.

Our Scams Action service provides people with access to tailored advice about spotting and reporting scams, as well as helping them find a way forward if they've been a victim of a scam. We also offer seamless referrals to our local offices for support with related issues, such as debt.

This year, we had over 36,000 calls and webchats with clients, our online scams helper tool was used by over 83,000 people and our scams advice pages were viewed over 800,000 times.

More than 8 in 10 people said they would use the service again and would recommend it to others. And more than 6 in 10 who accessed the service said their problem was resolved—with nearly half (49%) saying they could not have resolved their problem without our help.

> **"I am so embarrassed by what happened. Citizens Advice told me to get in touch with my bank and trading standards. I really didn't think I would get my money back but had to try as I really thought I would have to sell my house. I am so relieved that my bank gave me back my money. I've been so lucky and I'm so grateful to Citizens Advice and my bank for everything. There is still good in this world."**
>
> **—Client, online dating scam victim**

Help to Claim

Help to Claim is our dedicated service supporting people to make a universal credit claim, from application through to their first full payment.

We helped over 229,000 people directly through 173,000 phone calls, 56,000 webchat sessions and 3,400 face-to-face appointments. We also saw 3.9 million views of the self-help online advice on our website.

This support has had a clear positive impact on those who came to us for help. 4 in 5 people said they felt less stressed, depressed or anxious after using our service, while 95% said they had a good experience and would recommend us. The estimated public value of our advice was £549 million in 2020/2021.

> **"I was anxious, stressed out to the max until I made that first call to Citizens Advice which put me at ease. It was a breath of fresh air to hear a friendly voice rather than an automated one. Citizens Advice does wonders for people's lives."**
>
> **—Client**

Consumer service

The Citizens Advice consumer service provides practical and impartial advice on how to resolve consumer problems. It can tell clients which laws and regulations apply to their situations and pass information about complaints on to Trading Standards.

In 2020 to 2021, we supported people through 890,000 contacts, including 115,000 for energy issues.

81% of consumers
were satisfied with the service they received

65% of clients
had their problems partially or fully resolved, an increase from 61% in 2019/2020

Financial modelling for Help to Claim is based on a follow up client outcomes survey launched in Q4 2020/2021.

Energy

We're helping people access expert energy advice, get better energy deals and make savings through our Energy Advice Programme and the Big Energy Saving Network. We delivered 12,500 guidance sessions to fuel-poor consumers and those who were struggling to pay their bills, and our Big Energy Saving Network programme helped 16,500 people in 2020/2021. Despite the move away from face-to-face appointments, 90% of our clients found the service easy to access and 3 in 4 said the advice helped them to keep their home warmer. We saved consumers £4.1 million, which was significantly higher than last year.

How our advice helped *David

David is a housing association tenant, living in a flat with his partner and 2 young children. Over the winter, their fuel bills increased considerably, at the same time their income dramatically fell after they had to close the shop they ran due to the pandemic. This meant they had to be careful about budgeting and, through our promotion work with the local council, they found out about the Big Energy Saving Network.

Through a telephone appointment, our adviser helped David save £252 annually by switching to a cheaper energy tariff and applying for the Warm Home Discount.

*Client names have been changed and certain details have been omitted or changed to preserve their anonymity.

Witness Service

In a year where witnesses weren't able to attend court with supporters, the assistance of a friendly and empathetic Witness Service volunteer was more valuable than ever. In our witness experience survey:

96%
said they were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with our support

90%
said we helped them feel more confident about giving evidence

93%
said we met all or most of their needs

> **"Being a witness in court was overwhelming and scary. However, the Witness Service volunteers made us feel so comfortable and supported us throughout the day. They were truly amazing and we couldn't have done it without their help."**
>
> **—Witness**

Debt

We helped over 250,000 people with debt problems, supporting clients to write off a total of £180 million of debt and 135,000 clients gain £840 million of extra income. 9 in 10 said they would recommend our services to a friend and 86% said we helped them find a way forward.

How our advice helped *Anna

Anna had been working in the hospitality industry but was made redundant after the outbreak of the pandemic. They had several credit debts subject to payment holidays.

Our adviser supported them to apply for Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment—securing Anna £404 per month in additional income—and helped them agree a moratorium with all creditors.

Anna was advised on all their options and chose to apply for a Debt Relief Order. A total of £11,696 was written off and they say their mental health has improved following our support.

*Client names have been changed and certain details have been omitted or changed to preserve their anonymity.

Gambling

Our Gambling Support Service provides advice, information and referrals to people at risk of harm from gambling. During the pandemic we moved rapidly from a community-based service to fully digital delivery and screened over 19,000 people, with around 5% of those identified as experiencing harm from gambling.

How our advice helped *Sally

When Sally came to Citizens Advice for help with benefits and debt problems, she told us her debts were a result of playing online bingo. Lockdown, living alone and mental health struggles led to her gambling. This was the first time Sally had been asked about gambling and been given the opportunity to discuss it.

We helped Sally with her debts, supported her to download tools to prevent her accessing gambling sites and referred her to the National Gambling Treatment Service. A follow-up call to Sally a week later found her feeling more positive and in control of her gambling.

*Client names have been changed and certain details have been omitted or changed to preserve their anonymity.

Our value to society

We use an established model to calculate the financial value of our advice and the positive outcomes it contributes to individuals and society.

It's impossible to put a value on everything we do, so this is likely to be a conservative estimate. For more detail on these savings and a full explanation of our model, please see our financial modelling.

In 2020/21, for every £1 invested in Citizens Advice we generated:

£1.94 in savings to government and public services (fiscal benefits).
By helping stop problems occurring or escalating, we reduce pressure on public services like health, housing or out-of-work benefits.

Total:
£618 million

£13.36 in wider economic and social benefits (public value).
Solving problems improves lives and this means better wellbeing, participation and productivity for the people we help.

Total:
£4.3 billion

£8.35 in value to people we help (financial outcomes following advice).
As part of our advice we can increase people's income, through debts written-off, taking up benefits and solving consumer problems.

Total:
£2.7 billion

Note:

Savings to individuals and fiscal savings figures are lower than last year. Caution should be exercised in making direct comparisons with previous years for the following reasons:

Citizens Advice services in general have seen a different profile of clients in terms of issues and problems this year compared with most others, primarily because of external factors associated with the pandemic and lockdown

Across Citizens Advice, there were fewer debt, benefits and housing clients. Fewer of the debt clients seen had debts written off, and fewer of the housing clients seen were affected by homelessness. In the model, the numbers of these client groups contribute heavily to the overall savings figures generated

We have updated the impact assumption figures used in the fiscal and public model through a new iteration of our National Outcomes and Impact Research (NOIR) conducted in 2020/21.

Citizens Advice helps people find a way forward.

We provide free, confidential and independent advice to help people overcome their problems. We are a voice for our clients and consumers on the issues that matter to them.

We value diversity, champion equality, and challenge discrimination and harassment.

We're here for everyone.

citizensadvice.org.uk

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